

Sermon preached at St John's Devizes, 4 November 2018 (All Saints)

I have spoken before of Canon Mark Oakley the author of "The Splash of Words", and of how he lost his faith during his training. Among the friends who helped him to recover he mentioned Canon Bill Vanstone. I was privileged to be a friend of Bill's in his later years, and I shall be speaking about him this morning. I don't think he could be called a saint; saintly certainly.

He was a man of powerful intellect. At Oxford he got a Double First. He then moved on to Cambridge and got another First, a starred First, before gaining further distinctions in New York. He could have been a Professor, and maybe have moved on to a Bishopric. He turned down many offers. What he felt called to be was a Parish Priest, a Pastor. For twenty years he was Vicar of a Parish, Kirkholt, then a new housing estate near Rochdale.

He writes a fascinating account of his introduction to Kirkholt in his first book, "Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense". It was extremely depressing. Here there was an already thriving community of contented people at ease with themselves. On his first visit he had to ask directions to the new church, which was not yet completed. Nobody knew or cared. Without exception people were courteous to this stranger with a dog-collar: without exception people were indifferent. At this stage it seemed that his ministry was superfluous. What was the point of a church which nobody wanted or needed?

Bill had two answers to this conundrum. The first was a practical one. As soon as he was established he gave himself to the people of Kirkholt. Every ounce of his physical and mental energy was at their disposal, churchgoers or not. He never married -- the parish was his family. He rarely took a holiday: he ran summer camps for the boys of the Parish.

He could become angry if people spoke of his moving on to higher forms of ministry. "There is no promotion from the parochial ministry", he said. At his funeral the late Lord Runcie, former Archbishop of Canterbury and a friend of Bill's from their student days, preached the sermon, and said this of Bill's parish work: "The approach of most people to God is determined, not by general ideas or intellectual formulations but by concrete signs and evidence of the nearness and care of God in those commonplace and sensitive situations that matter most to them - from the birth of a child to the death of a parent - from a quarrel with a neighbour to a promotion at work - from the onset or cure of an illness to the loss or finding of a job. The priest who is close enough to many of the parishioners to become aware of these points and times of sensitivity and who is available and attentive when and where they occur is undertaking a very important task. For there is no letter, no card, no fax, no overhead projector, no computer nor anything in all creation which can make up for the physical presence of the man or woman of God. That is what Bill provided".

I mentioned two answers to Bill's conundrum -- what is the point of a church which nobody seems to want or need? The second one was the theologian's answer. He more or less developed it from the first. He came to see that the love God has for His creatures needs, for its completion, its fulfilment, our recognition. Everyone who loves is aware of surrendering their detachment, their independence, of making

themselves vulnerable in a way in which they were not vulnerable before. So if the relationship of God to the world is a relationship of love, then God must wait upon the world for its response: become dependent on the way the world is for the fulfilment -- or frustration - of his own loving endeavour.

Only when we recognise God's loving activity as His can we respond as we should. The primary function of the Church is precisely to focus this recognition and response. The church provides a place, a means, for prayer, worship, adoration: it helps us to obey Our Lord's first great Commandment; and, what is crucial, from this flows our ability to observe the second Commandment. We respond to God's love for us by loving Him and our neighbour.

Bill was a strong character, with strong views. He loved the Book of Common Prayer. He celebrated the Eucharist in the Eastward position. Like all sound Christians Bill was a great admirer of Saint Paul, and reckoned that the key to good ministry – and in this context we are all ministers – is exemplified by St Paul. Paul could say “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” because, as Bill puts it, “ he followed his master in being constantly and wholeheartedly *available* for whatever was required of him, whether it was settling a sordid quarrel, the raising of money for the saints, debate with Athenian philosophers, or endurance of a prison cell”.

Bill emulated St. Paul in his generosity, generosity of self giving, but occasionally he got fed up. Quite early in his ministry he had worked for months all the hours that God gives and needed a break. Eventually he managed a week but circumstances changed and only three days was possible. Less than overjoyed he went to some friends on the coast and was greatly refreshed on the first day. On the second day he received a letter from the parish, with a long, petulant, set of complaints arising from an incident which happened just after he had left. He hit the roof. Couldn't they leave him alone for three days? He marched out and along the cliff top. He quotes Burns: “Gathering my brows like a gathering storm, nursing my wrath to keep it warm”. Feeling thus he went some distance till he was carried round the path to his left and was confronted: by a large black stone cross. The cross held him, not bowing so much as cowering in front of it, then turned him round and sent him back: a new man. It felt as if the power of the cross had pricked the balloon of his self pity, lanced the carbuncle of his anger and drained its poison. He didn't think: his brain was not involved. The meaning of the Cross healed him.

I knew Bill in his last years, most of them after he retired. He moved from his beloved north of England to live near his sister in the Cotswolds, but soon after he settled there she had a stroke and though she survived he was largely deprived of her companionship; and he had to contend with a painful arthritic hip. But he never complained. On the contrary he had a tremendous capacity for enjoying life. To him the awareness of being blessed was a distinguishing mark of faith. He *was* so aware and communicated that awareness to me and to all those lucky enough to know him.